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REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP IN DEMOCRACIES

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Professor Ross in this *Journal* and Mr. Meredith Nicholson in the *Atlantic Monthly* have recently been discussing the question of the organization and expression of the will of the body social. The latter writer complains of the undue prominence of "the second-rate man" in government and in administration. He points to the glaring facts of municipal, state, and national politics and asks whether it can be affirmed with any degree of truth that "the people" are properly served or represented.

The difficulties of organizing and expressing the popular will are much better appreciated by Professor Ross than by Mr. Nicholson, whose treatment of the subject leaves much to be desired from the scientific viewpoint. But so many assumptions are made, so many fallacies revealed in current treatment of the question of leadership and representation in democracies—whether "pure" or mixed and incomplete—that a little further discussion may be profitable.

"Democracy, ideally considered," writes Mr. Nicholson, "is an affair of the wisest and best." "In theory," he continues, "the weight of the majority is with the fit"—fitness being defined as "the competence produced by experience and training, fortified with moral character and a sense of responsibility."

Accept these premises and certain questions arise at once. Why do democratic constituencies elect second- and third-rate men to serve them? Why do "representatives" misrepresent with impunity in so many cases? Do not people know their own interests? Are voters blind, ignorant, corrupt? Do we pay too little attention to public affairs? Do we regard government as a relatively unimportant matter, and would we rather make money, or study, or play, than devote time and energy to politics and administration in the hope of reducing taxation and preventing waste? Are we so optimistic, shallow, foolish, as to imagine that unfit and incapable men

will do as well in office as fit and high-minded men? Do we lightly assume, because occasionally at critical times men who were not suspected of greatness rise nobly to their opportunities and duties, that all men are potentially great and masterful? Various explanations of the kinds indicated in these queries have, as a matter of fact, been advanced by popular writers and speakers. They are all unsatisfactory and superficial.

Let me open the discussion with a little story "from life." A few years ago a group of Hull-House workers and residents were after dinner informally discussing the prospects of an impending election in the city and county. Some spoke with a touch of irony or bitterness of the fact that certain wards and districts were "hopeless," that is, that they habitually elected as aldermen or county commissioners local bosses, saloon-keepers, "good fellows" known in lodges and benevolent societies, and that candidates of education, character, and progressive opinions had no chance whatever in such districts. Miss Jane Addams, who was in the group mentioned, in her quiet, mild way put to the "complainants" these simple questions:

And why should not the people of the wards you speak of elect saloon-keepers, shrewd and amiable "mixers," glib talkers, and good fellows? Do not such candidates fairly represent the district? Can we expect voters to elect men they do not know, they hardly understand, they expect nothing of in concrete human terms? Is it not as natural for one ward to elect a liberal, popular, genial saloon-keeper as it is for a University ward to elect a professor, or a business man of standing, or a lawyer of some distinction and public spirit?

Although there was nothing strikingly original in this train of thought, the group felt that Miss Addams had given them a valuable lesson in the meaning and limitations of democratic government. "Why, yes," was the general reflection, "all this is not only natural, but inevitable. Voters will and must elect men they know, like, understand, and trust—men 'after their own heart.'" Such men are often false friends and moral traitors, but the voters betrayed by them either do not know this fact, in the sense of fully realizing it, or else they put a different construction on the acts of treachery and betrayal. They think their will is expressed, their "side" is properly represented and protected, and are not aware of any actual grievance or injustice.

Now, if this be true, the whole democratic problem assumes a wholly different aspect. We must start with different definitions, different propositions, and different questions. The remedy for misrepresentation, for corrupt and bad government, betrayal of the popular will, appears in a different light. The phrases "better wards," "better elements," "hopeless wards," etc., acquire a new meaning. Why cannot all the wards and districts be "good"? What makes so many of them "bad"? We no longer talk of organizing and expressing the will of a ward; important as this is, even more important, we see, is the question of elevating the will of certain wards, of causing a revision by them of their notions of "fitness" and "loyalty."

It would be difficult, I think, to improve upon the definition of democracy embodied in Mr. Lincoln's famous phrase, "A government of the people, for the people, by the people." Every essential element is present in this formula; but how different it is from the formula, "A government for the people, of and by the wisest and best of the people"! All sorts of men make up a people. We are not all good and wise. Many are shortsighted, ignorant, wrong, perverse. Many are selfish, sordid, indifferent, or even hostile to the general good. Not a few among us, as things are, actually want inefficient and wasteful government, even corrupt government. Honest and efficient government would impoverish or embarrass many, and they are able to find excuses for their support of bad government that drown the still small voice of conscience. To say this is to see things as they are, not to indulge in cheap cynicism. Carlyle was splenetic and rash when he described the people of Great Britain as "mostly fools." Ibsen, the aristocratic radical, was merely paradoxical when he uttered the half-truth that "the majority is always wrong." The situation is seldom, if ever, as simple as these phrases imply.

Of the millions who more or less intelligently wish and prefer good government, many are too busy to do any real work for good government. They will "vote right" when the issue is plain and plainly drawn. They will exercise a certain amount of independence and occasionally scratch the regular party ticket. Tell them that eternal vigilance is the price of good government, and that

good government involves the putting of first-rate men in office, and they will mildly express their concurrence; but they do not see how *they* can carry these "essentials" into effect. They know that the machine men, the office-holders and office-seekers, are eternally vigilant, but they rightly point out that with the groups just named politics is a matter of bread and butter, a trade or profession. The time such persons give to organization, to "preparedness" in a political sense, to meetings, conferences, stump-speaking, and the like is time taken from the public's business, in many cases, or from business that is intimately connected with politics. How can the man who neither seeks nor expects office, who has to make a living and save for a rainy day, compete with the professional politicians and their quasi-professional allies?

Moreover, the men who are nominated and elected by the machines and regular organizations are "first-rate men" from the viewpoint of those machines and organizations. This Mr. Nicholson and others apparently overlook. Machine men do, and do well, what the organizations direct them to do; they are therefore satisfactory agents and representatives. They are not first-rate men from the viewpoint of the thoughtful and sincere lovers of good government, but there is little or nothing in democratic institutions and "popular" government to insure the nomination and election of morally and intellectually first-rate persons.

The question of fitness in politics and government inevitably recalls the forgotten controversies over the "survival of the fittest" in the Darwin-Wallace theory of natural selection. It seemed at first impossible for the superficial writer or reader to distinguish between fitness in the sense of sufficient adaptability and fitness in the moral sense. In present democratic politics the fittest are those who are best adapted to existing conditions. The spoilsman and corrupt tool of the predatory interests is not even a third-rate man morally or intellectually, but the ward that keeps him in the city council undoubtedly regards him as a first-rate man from its own point of view. He is often benevolent, charitable, helpful in need. He obtains jobs and favors for his constituency. He attends weddings and funerals, and displays power and energy. Similarly, the more educated and polished man in the council, or

legislature, or Congress, who owes his place to great corporations and to special interests, whatever he may seem to the impartial and public-spirited element in his district, "looks good," that is, looks "first rate," to the interests whose defender or apologist he really is, although we call him a public servant or a representative of the people.

Let us, however, put the question in a different way. It being idle to dream of universal goodness and universal culture, are there courses open to us whereby we might hope to secure more able and honest representatives of the great public than we now have and to render so-called representative government actually representative of "the people"?

Two sets of proposals are encountered in the literature of the subject. One emphasizes the need and rightness of "proportional representation." Since John S. Mill's time much has been written on this reform, but it is only in connection with one or two commission-manager city charters of the most advanced type that proportional representation is now being accorded a trial in this country. Not one of our states has adopted this principle, although in Illinois we have minority representation in the lower branch of the legislature—a scheme, by the way, that the professional politicians have known how to convert to their own exclusive advantage, a scheme that has disappointed the reformers, and that the next constitutional convention is expected to abolish root and branch. The case for proportional representation seems unanswerable until it is closely analyzed in the light of certain facts. In every state there are Republicans, Democrats, Progressives, Socialists, Single-Taxers, Prohibitionists, and so on. If representative government means the representation of ideas, opinions, sentiments, programs—and, of course, parties are made for ideas and sentiments, and are useful merely as instrumentalities of intellectual and social commerce—it follows apparently that our electoral systems should provide for the fair proportional representation of the various prevalent schools of opinion. The supposition is that if we properly emphasized *opinion* in our representative scheme, and gave each school the number of representatives it was entitled to on the principle of proportion, the result would be, not merely justice to

opinions and groups that today are not represented at all, or represented by fewer men than they should have for official spokesmen, but also a better quality of representation for the other parties.

Unfortunately this second conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises. Proportional representation would indeed give the radical and reform parties more representatives in city, state, and national chambers than they now succeed in putting in, but would it give us better Republicans, better Democrats, better Progressives? When a man runs as a Democrat, we hardly know what opinions he entertains. He may be a revenue-tariff man or a protectionist; he may be an imperialist or an anti-imperialist; he may be an old-fashioned state-rights champion, or he may believe in making large concession to nationalism. What is true of Democrats is true of the other big parties. We have Roosevelt Republicans, Penrose-Barnes Republicans, LaFollette Republicans. Manifestly proportional representation under the system of great parties would not in the least guarantee any notable improvement in the quality of representation in the great parties, each of which is really a house badly divided against itself, a house constantly threatened by insurgency and discontent. Proportional representation would not destroy the power of the party machines and embattled spoilsmen.

This brings us to the second set of proposals, chief of which is this: that we should do our utmost to break up the "big" political parties and substitute group government for party government. The late Professor Goldwin Smith, in the last several years of his life, devoted much time and energy to destructive criticism of party government. He attributed thereto a great deal of the opportunism, cowardice, hypocrisy, servility, and degradation of the political life of Britain and the United States. He argued—never lacking illustrations and fresh instances—that party discipline stifles independence and makes men dishonest and unfair. He contended that the vain effort to placate the many incongruous elements of a "great" party inevitably leads to neglect and loss of the ideals or principles which called the party into being, the means to the end being finally mistaken for the end itself. A man, he argued, may represent an interest, a group, an opinion; but how can he represent

at one and the same time conflicting interests, divergent opinions, irreconcilable tendencies? M. Ostrogorski, the able Russian publicist, has written in the same vein and has proposed the total abandonment of "big" parties in favor of leagues, temporary associations, groups and "bloc" governments. France, of course, in the past two decades, has furnished an instructive model of group and "bloc" government, and it may be doubted whether any nation has been more faithfully represented at any time than France has been during this eventful period.

This process of division and disintegration has been at work in the British and American "big" parties. It is sufficient to mention the British Labor party and the Radical wing of the Liberal party. In the United States we have the Progressive party (which may be resuscitated at any time), the Prohibition party, and the Socialist party. Still the process has been slow, and it is difficult to see how it could have been artificially stimulated. Professor G. Smith, in his withering assaults on the party system, conspicuously failed to meet this difficulty. Parties will not disintegrate at the command of the frowning philosopher. They cannot be legislated out of existence by acts of Congress or Parliament. They may decay and die naturally as a result of new needs, new issues, new alignments. But, on the other hand, an unforeseen emergency, the appearance of a "really paramount" issue, may cause groups and factions to subordinate secondary demands to the urgent need and give the "big" party a new lease of life. It is tolerably certain, however, that, under normal circumstances, the future belongs, not to the big, heterogeneous, "historic parties," whose usefulness is now so seriously questioned, but to groups and smaller combinations that will severally represent live issues and glowing aspirations.

True, even under a system of group and "bloc" government compromise cannot wholly be avoided. France is an excellent illustration. The formation of the "bloc" during the critical Dreyfus agitation necessitated many reciprocal concessions and adjustments on the part of the groups that set out to save the Republic from chauvinism, militarism, and imperialism. But the concessions were made in the open; the give-and-take was honest

and strictly necessary. There was neither subterranean intrigue nor sacrifice of principle for the sake of office and glory.

Under group government it is undoubtedly easier to obtain fit and genuine representation. Each group may have its organization, its machine, its chronic office-seekers, its glib talkers; but the average member of the group, the average voter who reads the newspapers and attends the meetings and conferences of his group, is in touch with the machine and feels that he has some influence with the leaders. He does not feel so helpless, so insignificant, so impotent as the voter of a huge national party that lives, moves, and has its being in evasions, in artificial harmony arrangements, in empty generalities and catchwords.

It has already been remarked that in France there is little complaint of unfit representation in Parliament. As a rule each group sends its ablest men to serve it. It is not likely that the situation is materially different in the German Reichstag—at least, so far as the advanced radical groups are concerned. It is certain that the British Labor party, as well as the “left” Radical wing of the Liberal party, is remarkably well represented in the Commons. In the United States, likewise, the Socialists always manage to put their best foot forward in practical politics. The Congressmen, the state legislators, the mayors, and the aldermen they have succeeded in electing have been “first-rate” men from the viewpoint of the party leaders and active members. It is not then unreasonable to conclude that where parties are not too big, unwieldy, and heterogeneous, where they stand for definite principles and are not compelled to surrender ends to means, adequate and faithful representation by the best men available is not at all a difficult task. Proportional representation might well accompany group government. Indeed, it would become a necessity under it.

Can nothing be done, however, under existing conditions to put more fit men, first-rate men, in Mr. Nicholson’s sense of the phrase, into public office? The observer who is not blinded by a preconceived idea will hardly answer the question with an emphatic “No.” Something *can* be done; something is being done. One very promising way of doing this is to continue to peg away at the truth that administration is not synonymous with government;

that administrative questions are not to be confused with "politics"; that democracy does not involve rotation in office, frequent elections, clouds of obscure candidates, preposterous ballots, and the like. When a saloon-keeper is elected to a city council, the democratic principle is not necessarily violated. The saloon-keeper may be a "fit" representative of the majority of his ward. But when, after the election, the mayor who represents the whole city gives to a saloon-keeper a place in his cabinet, when he appoints him, say, to the commissionership of public works, or when the same mayor puts a lobbyist, cheap politician, and shyster into the office of corporation counsel, the democratic principle *is* violated. General policies are determined at the election; but not even the saloon-keeper's ward knowingly votes for inefficient, extravagant, wasteful administration. The president, the governor, the county or city head, should and can forget "politics" after installation and seek fit, first-rate men and women for the positions they have to fill. In administrative offices we have every right to insist on first-rate persons. The merit system has popularized this idea, and there is no excuse for unfit appointments. A chief executive cannot, as matters stand, be expected to go outside of his own party very frequently, but he can be expected to take the best timber his own party affords.

We have a right to demand training for administrative offices. We have a right to demand the steady extension of the merit system and the raising of the standards of appointment. The short ballot, the non-partisan ballot, the commission and commission-manager form of city and town government, the abolition of the party primary—these and similar reforms now favored by all moderate progressives are severally contributing to the cause of better and more business-like administration. The progress of this cause is by no means discouragingly slow in the United States. Look at the municipal government in New York today and compare it with that of twenty years ago. Look at Chicago and its city council, and consider what organization and systematic action have accomplished in the western metropolis, where twenty years ago franchise-stealing and riotous plunder were the rule in the city council. Moreover, when fit and conscientious men and women

observe the advance of good administration, they are induced to seek public office. Where the merit system prevails, and the competitive examinations are honest and fair, and tenure really secure, young men and women of promise deliberately fit themselves for public employment. They take special courses; they make public service a profession. Schools of civics and philanthropy are multiplying in the country because thousands of positions, humble as a rule, to be sure, are now open to trained applicants. Under the spoils system such applicants would never have had the ghost of a chance.

First-rate men will increasingly come forward and offer themselves to the electorate as it learns to demand efficiency and fitness, as it installs the modern governmental machinery which fit men and women will demand, and which is one of the conditions of success either in public or in private affairs.

Reverting now to lawmaking and political government as distinguished from administration, must one conclude that under existing party arrangements and educational levels it would be idle to dream of improved representation, of more first-rate men in office? By no means. Even that sort of representation can be improved if the disinterested citizenry will pay the price. Progress, Professor Dewey has said, is a "retail job," not a law of human nature. Political progress is a retail job. The advantage of organization is decisive in most instances. The business men, the social workers, the educators, the physicians, and the others who are dissatisfied with the quality of "representation" they get, and who think—and rightly think—that there are far too many lawyers in our legislative assemblies, will never mend matters by complaining or sighing. They can mend matters only by organizing and using the methods that the professional politicians use. Occasionally a party machine will yield to pressure and throw some nominations to the business or reform groups of the constituency. But such occasions are rare. The way to put more fit business men, more fit social workers, into legislative assemblies is to start and maintain active local and central organizations for that purpose.

The political machines have known how to circumvent the direct primary. If that new device has disappointed most of us, it is

because the people have not taken the chance the direct primary was designed to give them. The machines have their slates ready for the primary; they "recommend" candidates to the voters, and on primary day disciplined brigades do the bidding of the bosses. The independent candidate makes a poor showing unless a moral crusade is "on" and public sentiment is aroused and deeply stirred. If we make further progress and substitute nomination by simple petition for the primary; if we simplify the nominating machinery to the last degree, we shall no doubt deprive party machines of some advantages; but we shall not, in any event, do away with the need and value of organization, discipline, and systematic work.

It is not likely, however, that citizens will ever organize for the specific purpose of "nominating and electing first-rate men and women to public office." The slogan is really too vague, the obstacles in the way too many; for men prefer a second-rate representative who agrees with them on the tariff and trusts, on labor legislation and taxation, etc., to a first-rate representative who disagrees. The tactics of the "drys," as of the "wets," in many contests have demonstrated the difficulty of reconciling the demand for a single-minded, unbending champion of an alleged "paramount issue" with the demand for general breadth and fitness in a candidate. The "drys" have often nominated narrow-minded fanatics; the wets have nominated spoilsmen and grafters. "You can't have everything," is the excuse. Well, democracy at large cannot have everything. It cannot have government by the wisest and best at this stage of economic, social, and political development. It may never have such "ideal" government. But there is no reason why it should not have better and better government, more and more able and morally fit men in office. To raise political standards you must "move the masses," as President Wilson said to an equal-suffrage convention. Adequate and efficient machinery is only one essential of good government; popular intelligence and rectitude is another. Ours is an age of social and economic reforms, and what is the ultimate object of these reforms if not the intellectual and moral uplifting of the masses? To discuss problems of political organization and political expression without bearing in mind their close and vital connection with economic and social

problems—problems of wealth distribution, of industrial organization, of land tenure, of taxation, of immigration, etc.—is to move in a world of shadows and phantoms, to forget the realities. To say, as some writers have said, that corrupt government blocks democratic progress is to put the cart before the horse. Corrupt government is a symptom, a result. Bad and unjust social conditions beget bad government by corrupting many of the victims of the injustice, by making them servile, sordid, indifferent, cowardly, and even venal. The worst results of economic injustice are moral, not material. Political integrity and political independence and courage presuppose a certain level of economic independence, of comfort, thrift, self-reliance. An enslaved, wretched, and timid proletariat, with armies of unemployed or half-employed, of landless and homeless job-seekers ever ready to accept the lowest subsistence wage and depress the standard of living, will not put health or virtue into democratic forms of government. In short, the true political reformer is first of all a social and economic reformer. He realizes that political democracy is decaying because our industrial régime is autocratic and demoralizing. He knows that the initiative, the referendum, the system of proportional representation, the short ballot, and what not will do little for modern democracy if we continue to neglect the questions of land tenure, wage relations, privilege, monopoly.

To sum up and bring together our conclusions, democratic government breaks down and the “servants of the people” too often betray and oppress the people; but the people themselves often put and keep such “servants” in power. The intellectual and moral conditions of the people are responsible for their political ignorance and their false or low standards.

The basis of sound and lasting political reform is social and economic reform. The foundations of political democracy are industrial. But while we must not expect too much from political movements and reforms, we must beware, on the other hand, of errors of the opposite kind—of belittling and deriding political reforms as matters of no consequence whatever. Something can be done even now toward a more wholesome organization of the popular will and a fairer, surer expression of it. The big parties,

having outlived their usefulness, should be broken up rather than artificially stimulated. Definite groups and definite opinions should be encouraged to seek fair and candid representation in government. Straddling, dodging, and time-serving should be sternly exposed and condemned by every honest agency in the community. Clear, definite statements of principles and intentions should be demanded of every party and every candidate for an elective office of importance.

Proportional representation should be demanded, not only as a matter of simple justice to groups not represented at all, or very inadequately represented, under present arrangements, but in the interest of political honesty generally and in order to emphasize and direct public attention to avowed opinion as distinguished from vague class interest.

The unfair advantages enjoyed by party machines and professional politicians should be minimized as far as possible, and the nominating process should be simplified. The individual voter should be encouraged to exercise his privileges and not, as now, discouraged by restrictions and burdens that have been imposed in the interest of party organizations. Independent voting should be made easy, not difficult. Campaigns should be shortened and anti-corrupt practice acts strengthened.

Administration should be more carefully and rigorously separated from politics, and the merit system should be extended in every direction, up and down. Public employees should be trained and well—but not too well—paid for their work. The higher positions should not be made too attractive financially, and public service should be treated as a public honor and privilege. Wherever possible, citizens should be asked to serve without pay, and paid officials should solicit and organize wide co-operation with them on the part of disinterested men and women who have time and energy to devote to social service.

It cannot be doubted that these "minor measures" would improve the quality of government and administration. How much? No one can say, but enough to make the efforts worth while. For deeper and larger political reforms, however, we must work indirectly rather than directly—via industrial, economic, and social reforms of a truly radical nature.